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Race, the Priesthood, and Temples

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The history of the race-based priesthood and temple restrictions within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is best understood as an evolution away from racially open priesthood and temples toward segregated priesthood and temples and then back again. This evolution is difficult to understand without first understanding the power of white privilege in nineteenth-century American politics, economy, and society and the corresponding effort among the white Protestant majority to deny the blessings of whiteness and therefore social respectability to Mormons. Even though the majority of Mormons were white in the nineteenth century, outsiders persistently suggested that they did not act white or look white and that they were more like other marginalized racial groups—red, black, or yellow—than white. The scientific and medical communities even suggested that Mormon polygamy was spawning a new, degraded race. Within this context, the Church moved unevenly across the course of the nineteenth century toward whiteness, an evolution that came at the expense of fellow black Saints. In 1978 the Church reversed course and returned to its racially universalistic roots.

A racially expansive vision of redemption through Jesus Christ for all of God's children marked the early decades of the Church's existence. One early leader, William Wines Phelps, wrote in 1835 that "all the families of the earth . . . should get redemption . . . in Christ Jesus," regardless of "whether they are descendants of Shem, Ham, or Japheth." Another publication declared that all people were "one in Christ Jesus . . . whether it was in Africa, Asia, or Europe." Apostle Parley P. Pratt similarly professed his intent to preach "to all people, kindred, tongues, and nations without any

exception" and included India's and Africa's "sultry plains" in his vision of the global reach of Mormonism.[1]

This universal invitation initially included extending all of the unfolding ordinances of the Restoration to all members. To date there are no known statements made by Joseph Smith Jr. of a racial priesthood or temple restriction. In fact, there is incontrovertible evidence for the ordination of at least two black men, Q. Walker Lewis and Elijah Abel, during the Church's first two decades. However, racial restrictions developed under Brigham Young and were solidified over the course of the last half of the nineteenth century under subsequent leaders.

Brigham Young's rationale for the restriction was taught and preached as doctrine and centered upon the biblical curse and "mark" that God placed upon Cain for killing his brother Abel. Over time, other justifications tied to the premortal existence and the War in Heaven attempted to validate the practice, even though they were never used by Brigham Young. Some leaders also looked to the Book of Abraham and its passages regarding a Pharaoh whose lineage was "cursed . . . as pertaining to the priesthood."[2] Even though Joseph Smith produced the Book of Abraham, he never used it to justify a priesthood restriction, and neither did Brigham Young.[3]

The curse in the Book of Mormon of a "skin of blackness"[4] was never used as a justification for withholding the priesthood or temple ordinances from black Mormons. LDS leaders and followers alike understood the Book of Mormon curse to apply to Native Americans and viewed it as reversible. It was a vision of Indian redemption that placed white Latter-day Saints as agents in that process. In contrast, Brigham Young claimed the biblical curse of Cain was in God's hands only, something humankind could not influence or remove until God commanded it.[5]

Whiteness in American History and Culture

Being white in American history was considered the normal and natural condition of humankind. Anything less than white was viewed as a deterioration from normal, a situation that made such a person unfit for the blessings of democracy. Being white meant being socially respectable; it granted a person greater access to political, economic, and social power. Politicians equated whiteness with citizenship and fitness for self-rule. In 1790, Congress passed a naturalization act that limited citizenship to "free white persons," a decision that had a significant impact on race relations in the nineteenth century. Even Abraham Lincoln, the future "great emancipator," believed that as long as blacks and whites coexisted, "there must be the position of superior and inferior," and he favored the "white race" in the "superior position." After the Civil War, as Southern whites reasserted white superiority, the Supreme Court affirmed their efforts when it ruled

that separate-but-equal facilities were constitutional, a decision that legalized the segregation of most facets of American life.[6]

Mormonism's founding decades coincided with a period in which whiteness itself came under question. "Race" at the time was a word loosely used to refer to nationality as much as skin color. People spoke of an "Irish race," for example, and began to create a hierarchy of racial identities, with Anglo-Saxons at the top. A variety of less-white "races" were further down the list. Scots, Teutons, Welch, Latin, Caucasian, Nordic, Celt, Slav, Alpine, Hebrew, Mediterranean, Iberic, and other such identifiers emerged to additionally blur racial categories.[7]

Mormonism was born in this era of splintering whiteness and did not escape its consequences. The Protestant majority in America was never quite certain how or where to situate Mormons within conflicting racial schemes, but they were nonetheless convinced that Mormonism represented a racial decline. Many nineteenth-century social evolutionists believed in the development theory: all societies advanced across three stages of progress, from savagery to barbarism to civilization. As societies advanced, they left behind such practices as polygamy and adherence to authoritarian rule. In the minds of such thinkers, Mormons violated the development theory in practicing polygamy and theocracy, something that no true Anglo-Saxon would do. Mormons thereby represented a fearful racial descent into barbarism and savagry. Within this charged racial context, Mormons struggled to claim whiteness for themselves despite the fact that they were overwhelmingly white.[8] As legal scholar Ariel Gross argues, whiteness in the nineteenth century was measured in distance from blackness, and Mormons spent considerable effort attempting to become securely white at the expense of their own black converts.[9]

Racialization of Mormons

The Saints' troubled sojourns in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois were fraught with the perception that Mormons were too open and inviting to undesirable people—blacks and Indians in particular. In 1830, the founding year of the Church, Black Pete became the first known African-American to join the faith. Within a year of his conversion, the fact that the Mormons had a black man worshiping with them made news in New York and Pennsylvania.[10] Edward Strutt Abdy, a British official on tour of the United States, noted that Ohio Mormons honoured "the natural equality of mankind, without excepting the native Indians or the African race." Abdy feared, however, that it was an open attitude that may have gone too far for its time and place. He believed that the Mormon stance toward Indians and blacks was at least partially responsible for "the cruel persecution by which they have suffered." In his mind, the Book of Mormon ideal that "all are alike unto God," including "black and white," made it unlikely that the Saints would

"remain unmolested in the State of Missouri."[11] Other outsiders tended to agree. They complained that Mormons were far too inclusive in the creation of their religious kingdom. They accepted "all nations and colours," they welcomed "all classes and characters," they included "aliens by birth" and people from "different parts of the world" as members of God's earthly family. Outsiders variously suggested that the Mormons had "opened an asylum for rogues and vagabonds and free blacks," maintained "communion with the Indians," and walked out with "colored women." In short, Mormons were charged with creating racially and economically diverse transnational communities and congregations, a stark contrast to a national culture that favored the segregation and extermination of undesirable racial groups.[12]

Some Latter-day Saints recognized the ways in which outsiders denigrated them and called their whiteness into question. In 1840, Apostle Parley P. Pratt, for example, complained that during the Saints' expulsion from Missouri "most of the papers of the State" described them as "Mormons, in contradistinction to the appellation of citizens, whites, &c., as if we had been some savage tribe, or some colored race of foreigners." John Lowe Butler, another Mormon expelled from Missouri, recalled one Missourian who declared that "he did not consider the 'Mormons' had any more right to vote than the niggers." In Illinois, Apostle Heber C. Kimball acknowledged that Mormons were not "considered suitable to live among 'white folks'" and later declared,"We are not accounted as white people, and we don't want to live among them. I had rather live with the buffalo in the wilderness."[13]

The open announcement of polygamy in 1852 moved the concern among outsiders in a new direction, toward a growing fear of racial contamination. In the minds of outsiders, Mormon polygamy was not just destroying the traditional family—it was destroying the white race. A US Army doctor reported to Congress that polygamy was giving rise to a "new race," filthy, sunken, and degraded. One writer argued that polygamy placed "a mark of Cain" on Mormon women while another said that Mormonism was "as degrading as old-fashioned negro slavery."[14] In general, outsiders conflated Mormons with blacks in a variety of ways. Their views were fluid and inconsistent, yet several themes emerged to suggest that outsiders sometimes viewed Mormons as racially suspect. Such depictions were designed to marginalize Mormons and justify discriminatory policies against them. As some outsiders described it, Mormon polygamy was a system of "white slavery," worse than the black slavery that "existed in the South, and *far more filthy.*" Mormon men were sometimes depicted as violent or indolent slave drivers and Mormon women as their "white slaves."[15] In 1882, Alfred Trumble's *The Mysteries of Mormonism,* a sensationalized dime novel, captured this national theme in pictorial form in an illustration simply labeled "wives as slaves" (see figure 1).[16]

More troubling to outsiders was the perception that Mormon polygamy was a system of unbridled interracial sex and marriage. One political cartoon depicted Brigham Young with two black wives and degraded interracial offspring. A parade in Indiana similarly featured a mock version of Brigham Young's family. It included six wives seated in Brigham Young's wagon, "white, black and piebald better-halves," a group of women unmistakably costumed to heighten national fears of race mixing and project them onto Mormons. The *New York Times* reported on two supposed "negro balls" in Salt Lake City where "negro men and women, and Mormon men and women, [were] all dancing on terms of perfect equality." The writer called it "the most disgusting of spectacles." Other cartoons and dime novels portrayed Mormon plural marriages as hotbeds of interracial sex, depictions deliberately designed to heighten American alarm over a perceived violation of racial boundaries and to portray Mormons as facilitators of racial contamination.[17]

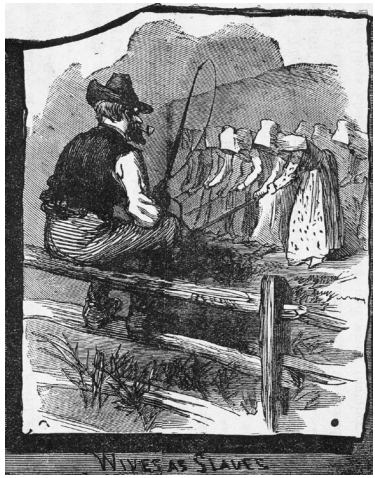

Figure 1. "Wives as Slaves," reprinted from Alfred Trumble, *The Mysteries of Mormonism*, New York *Police Gazette*, 1882. Special Collections, Rare Books Division, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, used by permission.

Cartoons sometimes portrayed Mormon polygamous families as interracial, and unabashedly so. In September 1896, during the presidential race between Democrat William Jennings Bryan and Republican William McKinley, *Judge* magazine ran one such cartoon (see figure 2). The illustration was titled "The 16 to 1 Movement in Utah." It used a contentious issue in the campaign that year to make fun of polygamy. Bryan advocated freeing the nation's monetary system from the gold standard by allowing for the coinage of silver at a ratio of sixteen to one. In the *Judge* cartoon, however, sixteen to one took on new meaning in Utah: sixteen women to one man. The polygamist man carried a bag labeled "from Utah" and stood front and center of his sixteen wives, eight on either side. It was not merely the number of women to men, however, that made the cartoon significant. It was the interracial nature of the Mormon family it depicted. The sixteen wives were portrayed in a variety of shapes, sizes, and relative beauty, but it was the first wife holding the man's left arm that was meant to unsettle its audience. She was a black woman boldly at the front of the other wives, a

Figure 2. Zim, "The 16 to 1 Movement in Utah," reprinted from *The Judge*, September 12, 1896, 176. L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

visual depiction of the racial corruption that outsiders worried was inherent in Mormon polygamy.[18]

The Priesthood and Temple Restrictions Begin

At the same time that outsiders persistently criticized Mormons as facilitators of racial decline, Mormons moved in fits and starts across the course of the nineteenth century away from blackness toward whiteness. It is a mistake to try to pinpoint a moment, event, person, or line in the sand that divided Mormon history into a clear before and after. Rather, the policies and supporting doctrines that Church leaders developed over the course of the nineteenth century increasingly solidified a rationale and gave rise to an accumulating precedent that each succeeding generation reinforced, so that by the late nineteenth century, LDS leaders were unwilling to violate policies they mistakenly remembered beginning with Joseph Smith. By 1908, Joseph F. Smith solidified the priesthood and temple restrictions in place when he erased Elijah Abel, a black priesthood holder, from collective Mormon memory. The new memory moving forward would be that of a white priesthood in place from the beginning, traceable from the founding prophet back to God, something with which no human could or should interfere.

Although Brigham Young's two speeches to the Utah Territorial legislature in 1852 mark the first recorded articulations of a priesthood restriction by a Mormon prophet-president, it is a mistake to solely attribute the ban to seemingly inherent racism in Brigham Young. His own views evolved between 1847, when he first dealt with racial matters at Winter Quarters, and 1852, when he first publicly articulated a rationale for a priesthood restriction. In 1847, in an interview with William (Warner) McCary, a black Mormon who married Lucy Stanton, a white Mormon, Brigham Young expressed an open position on race. McCary complained to Brigham Young regarding the way he was sometimes treated among the Saints and suggested that his skin color was a factor: "I am not a President, or a leader of the people" McCary lamented, but merely a "common brother," a fact that

he said was true "because I am a little shade darker." In response, Brigham Young asserted that "we dont care about the color." He went on to suggest that color did not matter in priesthood ordination: "We have to repent & regain what we have lost," Brigham Young insisted, "we have one of the best Elders, an African in Lowell—a barber," he reported. Brigham Young here referred to Q. Walker Lewis, a barber, abolitionist, and leader in the black community in Lowell, Massachusetts. Apostle William Smith, younger brother to Hyrum and Joseph Smith, had ordained Lewis an elder in 1843 or 1844. Brigham Young was fully aware of Lewis's status as a black man and priesthood holder and favorably referred to that status in his interview with McCary. Brigham Young offered Lewis as evidence that even black men were welcome and eligible for the priesthood in Mormonism.[19]

By December of 1847, however, Brigham Young's perspective had changed. Following his expedition to the Salt Lake Valley that summer, he returned to Winter Quarters. There he learned of McCary's interracial exploits in his absence. McCary had started his own splinter polygamous group predicated upon white women being "sealed" to him in a sexualized ritual. When his exploits were discovered, he and his followers were excommunicated and McCary left the Church, never to return. Young was also greeted with news of the marriage of Enoch Lewis, Q. Walker Lewis's son, to Mary Matilda Webster, a white woman in the Lowell, Massachusetts, branch. In response, Brigham Young spoke forcefully against interracial marriage, even advocating capital punishment as a consequence. Like Joseph Smith before him, Brigham Young opposed racial mixing and made some of his most pointed statements on the subject. Yet none of the surviving minutes from the meetings that Brigham Young held that year raise priesthood as an issue negatively connected to race. It would be five more years before Brigham Young articulated his position on that subject.[20]

Brigham Young most fully elaborated his views in 1852 before an all-Mormon Utah Territorial legislature as it contemplated a law to govern the black slaves that Mormon converts from the South brought with them as they gathered to the Great Basin. In fact, the very universalism of the gospel message in its first two decades created the circumstances for the restriction. Among those gathered to the Great Basin by 1852 were abolitionists and anti-abolitionists, black slaves, white slave masters, and free blacks. In casting a wide net, Mormonism had avoided the splits or schisms that divided the Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians over issues of race and slavery during the same period. Mormonism welcomed all comers into the gospel fold, black and white, bond and free. These various people brought their political and racial ideologies with them when they converted to Mormonism, ideas which initially existed independently of their faith. In 1852, however, Brigham Young prepared to order his diverse group of followers according to prevailing racial ideas, white over black and free over bound.[21]

Brigham Young tapped into long-standing biblical interpretations to draw upon Noah's curse of Canaan, but more directly to link a racial priesthood ban to God's purported "mark/curse" upon Cain for killing his brother Abel. "If there never was a prophet or apostle of Jesus Christ spoke it before, I tell you, this people that are commonly called Negroes are the children of old Cain. I know they are, I know they cannot bear rule in the priesthood."[22] In America, as scholar David M. Goldenberg demonstrates, the idea that black people were descendants of Cain dated back to at least 1733 and in Europe to as early as the eleventh century, long before Mormonism's founding in 1830. It was an idea that infused American culture and permeated racialized understandings of who black people were before Mormonism existed. In 1852, Brigham Young drew upon these same centuries-old ideas to both justify Utah Territory's law legalizing "servitude" and to argue for a race-based priesthood curse.[23]

Brigham Young insisted that because Cain killed Abel, all of Cain's posterity would have to wait until all of Abel's posterity received the priesthood. Brigham Young suggested that "the Lord told Cain that he should not receive the blessings of the Priesthood, nor his seed, until the last of the posterity of Abel had received the Priesthood." It was an ambiguous declaration he and other Mormon leaders returned to time and again. It suggested a future period of redemption for blacks but only after the "last" of Abel's posterity received the priesthood. Brigham Young and other leaders failed to clarify what that meant, how one might know when the "last" of Abel's posterity was ordained, or even who Abel's posterity were. In Brigham Young's mind, Cain's murder of Abel was an effort on Cain's part to usurp Abel's place in the covenant chain of priesthood leading back to father Adam.[24]

Brigham Young's position was fraught with inconsistencies and significant departures from aspects of other foundational Mormon principles. The Book of Mormon unambiguously posited that "all are alike unto God," "male and female, black and white, bond and free," and that all were invited to come unto Christ.[25] The Book of Mormon declared a universal salvation, a gospel message for "every nation, kindred, tongue, and people." It rhetorically demanded, "Hath [the Lord] commanded any that they should not partake of his salvation?" and then answered, "Nay." It declared that "all men are privileged the one like unto the other, and none are forbidden."[26] The Lord had established no limits to whom he invited to "partake of his salvation," even as the priesthood and temple restrictions created barriers to the fullness of that "salvation."

Brigham Young was also departing from his own earlier position on Q. Walker Lewis's ordination to the priesthood. And when he suggested that the priesthood was taken from blacks "by their own transgressions," he was further creating a race-based division to cloud black redemption and make each generation after Cain responsible anew for the consequences

of Cain's murder of Abel. Although Joseph Smith rejected long-standing Christian notions of original sin to argue that "men will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam's transgression," Brigham Young held millions of blacks responsible for the consequences of Cain's murder, something in which they obviously took no part.

By insinuation, Brigham Young's position removed the role of individual agency in the lives of blacks, a fundamental Mormon tenet. It instead gave Cain's poor exercise of agency immitigable power over millions of his supposed descendants. To make matters worse, Brigham Young's position failed to distinguish exactly what it was that made Cain's murder of Abel worthy of a multigenerational curse when other biblical figures who also committed homicidal acts did not experience the same fate. As Brigham Young argued, it was the fractured human network that resulted from Cain's effort to usurp Abel's place in the great chain of beings that most animated his articulation of a priesthood curse.[27]

Even though Brigham Young and other nineteenth-century leaders relied upon the curse of Cain as the reason for the priesthood and temple restrictions, another explanation gained ground among some Latter-day Saints in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Because the curse of Cain so directly violated the role of individual agency in the lives of black people, some Mormons turned to the premortal realm to solve the conundrum. In this rationale, black people must have been neutral in the War in Heaven and thus were cursed with black skin and barred from the priesthood. In 1869, Brigham Young rejected the idea outright, but it did not disappear.[28] In 1907, Joseph Fielding Smith, then serving as assistant church historian, argued that the teaching was "not the official position of the Church, merely the opinion of men."[29] In 1944, John A. Widtsoe also argued against neutrality when he said, "All who have been permitted to come upon this earth and take upon themselves bodies, accepted the plan of salvation." Nonetheless, he argued that because black people themselves "did not commit Cain's sin," an explanation for the priesthood restriction had to involve something besides Cain's murder of Abel. "It is very probable," Widtsoe believed, "that in some way, unknown to us, the distinction harks back to the pre-existent state."[30]

By the 1960s, Joseph Fielding Smith slightly altered the idea, from "neutral" to "less valiant" and offered his own explanation. In his *Answers to Gospel Questions*, he claimed that some premortal spirits "were not valiant" in the war in heaven. As a result of "their lack of obedience," black people came to earth "under restrictions," including a denial of the priesthood.[31] The neutral/less valiant justifications grew over time to sometimes overshadow the curse of Cain explanation.

Brigham Young, nonetheless, tied the ban to Cain's murder of Abel and did not stray from that rationale throughout his life. It became the

de facto position for the LDS Church, especially as it hardened in practice and preaching across the course of the nineteenth century. Brigham Young also spoke out forcefully against interracial sex and marriage, something that marked him more American than uniquely Mormon. Although his bombast advocated capital punishment, an extreme position even in the nineteenth century, those views were never codified into Utah law but certainly shaped attitudes among Mormons regarding race mixing.[32]

Brigham Young's two speeches to the territorial legislature were never published. Even though black priesthood ordination officially ended under Brigham Young, it was far from a universally understood idea. In 1879, two years after Brigham Young's death, Elijah Abel, the sole remaining black priesthood holder (Lewis had died in 1856) appealed to John Taylor for his remaining temple blessings: to receive the endowment and to be sealed to his wife. Abel had received the washing and anointing ritual in the Kirtland Temple and was baptized as proxy for deceased relatives and friends at Nauvoo but was living in Cincinnati by the time the endowment and sealing rituals were introduced.

It is impossible to know what might have happened if Abel had lived in Nauvoo during the introduction of temple rituals there. Surviving records, however, indicate that the Saints maintained an open racial vision to that date. At Nauvoo the Saints anticipated "people from every land and from every nation, the polished European, the degraded Hottentot, and the shivering Laplander" flowing to that city. They awaited "persons of all languages, and of every tongue, and of every color; who shall with us worship the Lord of Hosts in his holy temple, and offer up their orisons in his sanctuary."[33] By 1879, however, the space for full black participation was no longer as expansive, and Abel's appeal for his temple blessings prompted a further contraction.

John Taylor presided over an investigation into Abel's priesthood, which concluded that Abel was ordained an elder in 1836 and then a member of the Third Quorum of the Seventy that same year. Abel claimed that Joseph Smith himself sanctioned his ordination as an elder and he produced certificates to verify his claims. John Taylor nonetheless concluded that Abel's ordination was something of an exception, which was left to stand because it happened before the Lord had fully made his will known on racial matters through Brigham Young. John Taylor was unwilling to violate the precedent established by Brigham Young, even though that precedent violated the open racial pattern established under Joseph Smith. John Taylor allowed Abel's priesthood to stand but denied him access to the temple. Abel did not waver in his faith, though, and died in 1884 after serving a third mission for the Church. His obituary, published in the *Deseret News*, noted that he passed of "old age and debility, consequent upon exposure while laboring in the ministry in Ohio" and concluded that "he died in full faith of the

Gospel." It also substantiated his priesthood ordinations as an integral part of his identity.[34]

With Abel dead, Jane Manning James, another faithful black pioneer, took up the cause. She repeatedly appealed for temple privileges, including permission to receive her endowment and asked on one occasion to be sealed to Q. Walker Lewis. She was just as repeatedly denied. The curse of Cain was used to justify her exclusion. Although Church leaders did allow her to perform baptisms for dead relatives and friends and to be "attached" via proxy as a servant to Joseph and Emma Smith, she was barred from further temple access.[35]

Between the 1879 investigation led by John Taylor and 1908 when Joseph F. Smith solidified the bans, LDS leaders adopted an increasingly conservative stance on black priesthood and temple admission. They responded to incoming inquiries by relying upon distant memories and accumulating historical precedent. Sometimes they attributed the bans to Brigham Young and other times they mistakenly remembered them beginning with Joseph Smith.[36] George Q. Cannon also began to refer to the Book of Abraham as a justification for the ban. As finally articulated sometime before early 1907, leaders put a firm "one drop" rule in place: "The descendants of Ham may receive baptism and confirmation but no one known to have in his veins negro blood, (it matters not how remote a degree) can either have the Priesthood in any degree or the blessings of the Temple of God; no matter how otherwise worthy he may be."[37]

Then in 1908, President Joseph F. Smith solidified this decision when he recalled that Elijah Abel was ordained to the priesthood "in the days of the Prophet Joseph" but suggested that his "ordination was declared null and void by the Prophet himself." Four years earlier, Joseph F. Smith had implied that Abel's ordination was a mistake that "was never corrected," but now he claimed that Mormonism's founder had in fact corrected that mistake although he offered no evidence to substantiate his claim. Joseph F. Smith then recalled that Abel applied for his endowments and asked to be sealed to his wife and children, but "notwithstanding the fact that he was a staunch member of the Church, Presidents Young, Taylor, and Woodruff all denied him the blessings of the House of the Lord." Joseph F. Smith also deliberately curtailed missionary efforts among black people, a decision that ensured a white identity for Mormonism moving forward.[38]

This new memory became so entrenched among leaders in the twentieth century that by 1949 the First Presidency declared that the restriction was "always" in place: "The attitude of the Church with reference to Negroes remains as it has always stood. It is not a matter of the declaration of a policy but of direct commandment from the Lord." The "doctrine of the Church" on priesthood and race was in place "from the days of its organization," it professed. The First Presidency said nothing of the original black priesthood

holders, an indication of how thoroughly reconstructed memory had come to replace verifiable facts.[39]

Even though President David O. McKay pushed for reform on racial matters, he was convinced that it would take a revelation to overturn the ban. Hugh B. Brown, his counselor in the First Presidency, believed otherwise. Brown reasoned that because there was no revelation that began the ban, no revelation was needed to end it. McKay's position held sway, especially as McKay claimed he did not receive a divine mandate to move forward.[40] As early as 1963, however, Apostle Spencer W. Kimball signaled an open attitude for change: "The doctrine or policy has not varied in my memory," Kimball acknowledged, "I know it could. I know the Lord could change his policy and release the ban and forgive the possible error which brought about the deprivation."[41] That forgiveness ultimately came with Kimball at the helm in 1978.[42]

Understanding the Priesthood and Temple Bans

Apostle Bruce R. McConkie, a man responsible for some of the Church's justifications for a racial ban, denounced his own statements within months of the 1978 revelation. He asked an LDS audience at Brigham Young University to "forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or . . . whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world."[43] It was a statement that suggested that prior teachings on race were devoid of the "light and knowledge" that revelation represents to Latter-day Saints.

Even still, it is a difficult question with which some Saints continue to grapple: How could race-based priesthood and temple restrictions creep into the Church and last for so long? Was Brigham Young speaking for himself in 1852 when he announced the priesthood ban to the territorial legislature or for God? If for himself, why would God permit him to do so? If for God, why implement a restriction that violated scriptural notions of equality? Some have suggested that while the explanations for the bans are invalid, the bans themselves were inspired for purposes known only to God. In an American culture that so thoroughly privileged whiteness, the priesthood and temple restrictions brought Mormonism into conformity with the national mainstream. In this explanation, Brigham Young's and later leaders' implementation of the restrictions over time were bound by surrounding cultural norms, a violation of which may have produced significant disdain and additional turmoil for the nineteenth-century Church. This interpretation is problematic because if God or his prophets were somehow bound by cultural norms, the introduction of polygamy into an American society that so thoroughly abhorred it would have never taken place.

Others view the priesthood and temple restrictions as perhaps a trial for both white and black Latter-day Saints, or a way in which they were forced to confront the prejudices of their day, be it the 1850s or the 1950s. In this version, race becomes a calling, not a curse. Perhaps it was and is a test that forces Latter-day Saints to search their hearts to see if they might summon the courage and strength to rise above differences and embrace commonalities centered upon the worship of Jesus Christ. Could white Latter-day Saints transcend cultural norms and the privileges of being white in America, both before and after 1978, to welcome black people into the gospel fold, into the priesthood, into the temple, and into their hearts? Could black Latter-day Saints embrace a gospel message, both before and after 1978, that views them as children of God but that historically was burdened with teachings that they were cursed, less valiant, or neutral children of that same God? If God stands at the helm of his Church and directs his kingdom, what were his purposes and how does one square them with scriptural messages of universal salvation?

Ezra Taft Benson, speaking as an Apostle in 1975, offered an overarching principle that is broadly applicable to the historical development of the priesthood and temple bans. Benson was not speaking specifically about race, but his guiding philosophy might be useful in approaching the issue.

> If you see some individuals in the Church doing things that disturb you, or you feel the Church is not doing things the way you think they could or should be done, the following principles might be helpful: God has to work through mortals of varying degrees of spiritual progress. Sometimes he temporarily grants to men their unwise requests in order that they might learn from their own sad experiences. Some refer to this as the "Samuel principle." The children of Israel wanted a king like all the other nations. The prophet Samuel was displeased and prayed to the Lord about it. The Lord responded by saying, Samuel, "they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them." The Lord told Samuel to warn the people of the consequences if they had a king. Samuel gave them the warning. But they still insisted on their king. So God gave them a king and let them suffer. They learned the hard way. God wanted it to be otherwise, but within certain bounds he grants unto men according to their desires.[44]

President Benson's Samuel principle suggests a viable way of looking at the race question in the LDS Church, but first let us consider other examples. This concept applies to the lost 116 manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon as well. God let Joseph Smith give those pages to Martin Harris and then let him learn from "his own sad experience." The Lord called Joseph Smith to repentance in D&C 3:6–7: "And behold, how oft you have

transgressed the commandments and the laws of God, and have gone on in the persuasions of men. For, behold, you should not have feared man more than God."

Even the Prophet is susceptible to "the persuasions of men." Later, Joseph Smith organized the Kirtland Safety Society Anti-Banking Institution. He and other leaders did so after being denied a bank charter by the state of Ohio. They inserted the prefix "anti" before the word "banking" and opened the doors for business. Many Saints at the time believed the Prophet gave them assurances of the bank's success. Instead, the bank failed within a few months. Some Mormons lost their money and their faith. It was a factor in the disillusionment of many Saints, so much so that by June of 1837, Heber C. Kimball claimed that not twenty men in Kirtland believed Joseph Smith was a prophet. Parley and Orson Pratt, David Patten, Frederick G. Williams, Warren Parrish, David Whitmer, and Lyman Johnson all dissented. Why did God not stop Joseph Smith from founding the bank? God knew it would fail before it was founded. Why not simply tell Joseph Smith not to start the bank and save the Church from all of the turmoil that followed?[45]

Again, it seems that God let Joseph Smith and the Saints learn from their sad experiences. Perhaps the same principle is applicable to the development of the priesthood and temple bans. Were Church leaders susceptible to the "persuasions of men"? Did they borrow from then current political and "scientific" ideas about race that dominated nineteenth-century American thought? In what ways did the racialization of Mormons at the hands of outsiders have an impact upon events on the inside?

While I don't believe that God instigated the priesthood and temple restrictions, I do believe he let them happen, just as he let the children of Israel have a king, let Joseph Smith give Martin Harris the lost 116 pages, and let Joseph Smith open an "anti-banking institution." As President Benson said, "Sometimes [God] temporarily grants to men their unwise requests in order that they might learn from their own sad experiences."[46] In the end it makes me wonder what we are to learn from our racial history, and have we learned it? It should force us to stare the myth of a micromanager God squarely in the face and allow ample room for women and men with divine callings to fall short of the divine. My work as a historian has habituated me to messy history, something I expect just as much of religious people reaching toward heaven as I do of American history in general. As the American Historical Association puts it, "Multiple, conflicting perspectives are among the truths of history."[47]

As a twenty-first-century Latter-day Saint, I am not bound by Mormon leaders' past teachings on race any more than I am bound as an American by Thomas Jefferson's views on race. Past LDS leaders only speak for me on matters of race as far as they point me toward a universal redemption through Christ. For all of the emphasis that outsiders place upon a perceived

blind obedience to authority among Mormons, they fail to give equal weight to the democratizing impact of personal revelation, a central tenet of the faith from its beginnings. Even Brigham Young, sometimes depicted as an extreme authoritarian, counseled Mormons to avoid blind faith: "Let every man and woman know by the whispering of the spirit of God to themselves whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates or not. This has been my exhortation continually."[48]

While one may indeed find Latter-day Saints today who hold racists views, they do so in direct violation of Church standards, specifically a 2006 call to repentance by Church President Gordon B. Hinckley: "How can any man holding the Melchizedek Priesthood arrogantly assume that he is eligible for the priesthood whereas another who lives a righteous life but whose skin is of a different color is ineligible?" Speaking to the men of the Church, he further admonished, "Brethren, there is no basis for racial hatred among the priesthood of this Church. If any within the sound of my voice is inclined to indulge in this, then let him go before the Lord and ask for forgiveness and be no more involved in such."[49]

The 1978 Official Declaration is the only revelation in the LDS canon on priesthood and race. It returned the Church to its universalistic roots and reintegrated its priesthood and temples. It confirmed the biblical standard that God is "no respecter of persons"[50] and the Book of Mormon principle that "all are alike unto God."[51] The LDS Church in the twenty-first century no longer teaches that black skin is a curse, that black people are descendants of Cain or Ham, that blacks were less valiant or neutral or rejected the priesthood in the premortal existence, that mixed-race marriages are a sin or culturally undesirable, that blacks are inferior in any way to whites, or that the priesthood and temple restrictions were revelations from God. It does however emphatically endorse the admonition of President Gordon B. Hinckley, "Let us all recognize that each of us is a son or daughter of our Father in Heaven, who loves all of His children."[52]

Additional Resources

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2. Abraham 1:26.

3. For explanations on the Book of Abraham and race, see Alma Allred, "The Traditions of Their Fathers: Myth versus Reality in LDS Scriptural Writings," in *Black and Mormon*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst and Darron T. Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 34–49; Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 285–89; Hugh Nibley and Michael Rhodes, *One Eternal Round* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 2010), 162; Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, ed. Gary P. Gillum (Provo, UT: FARMS; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 360–61, 428, 528.

4. 2 Nephi 5:21.

5. For a thorough exploration of these events, see W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), chaps. 4–7 and conclusion.

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